
Middlebury College



Standing on the
Shoulders of Giants

Timothy Light

*Inaugural Address
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Timothy Light is the fourteenth president of Middlebury College. The announcement of his appointment, following a five-month international search, was made this past spring. A Chinese linguist and Asian Studies scholar, Dr. Light is no stranger to Middlebury as he has lectured on pedagogical matters at the Middlebury Chinese School several times in recent years. He is a 1960 Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Yale where he majored in English literature. In 1965, he received a Bachelor of Divinity degree from Union Theological Seminary and the following year received his M.A. from Teachers College, Columbia University, specializing in Teaching English as a Second Language. His Ph.D. degree is in linguistics from Cornell. He has taught at the New Asia College of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, at the University of Arizona, The Ohio State University and Kalamazoo College, and has been a visiting professor at the Beijing Language Institute in the People's Republic of China. As president, Dr. Light teaches a seminar in, "Trends in Higher Education."

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Wow! What a party!

I now know finally in my fifties what it is to feel like a baby. A baby is dressed up wonderfully in a baptismal gown, taken to church and made the center of great attention for which it can take no legitimate credit. Because it is a new arrival and helpless and does not know its way around, it tends to keep people up all night and is constantly making demands on the time and energy of others. Adults treat it with a humorous tolerance. But inherent in their indulgence is the unstated expectation that by a certain deadline, the newborn will sleep all night and somewhat later be toilet trained—or else. I think that the speech I am about to give is the or else.

We are here to celebrate Middlebury College. Colleges—especially premier colleges—exist and persist far beyond (and probably in spite of) any individual who happens to be inaugurated as president. This ceremony is a celebration of the College itself and of its history and of the tens of thousands of people who have made it the great institution that it now is.

A celebration like this does not just happen. It has been planned for and worked for by a lot of people during almost half a year. The inaugural committees of faculty, staff, students, and alumni were chaired by Provost and Vice President John McCardell. If you enjoy yourself this weekend and leave here with a sense of what a remarkable school this is, it will be because they spent their spring and summer making sure that this would all happen.

Often when we thank and praise, we forget the hundreds of people who make specific things happen, whose names we never know and whose faces we see only fleetingly. Middlebury College is especially blessed with a truly splendid staff, and all of them have contributed to your comfort, convenience, and enjoyment this weekend. The buildings and grounds staff and the custodial staff are responsible for making both the indoors and outdoors of this campus such an exquisite jewel which all of us enjoy every day here and which is especially beautiful today. The Dining Service, which just as a matter of course puts on the best student cafeteria meals I have ever eaten, has added the many hundreds of us today to its usual tasks. Our security service has made traffic and parking go as smoothly as those ever can on a day when there are many strangers and too many cars in a small place.

Countless clerical and administrative staff have labored often into the nights of the past two months to assure that lists were correct, that people were informed, and that all those things which needed printing were printed on time. And Middlebury students. More of these young people than I can ever count have helped and are helping in the ideas for this weekend (I hope that you enjoyed the parade), which is most of all Homecoming weekend, and in all aspects of the logistics. For all of these people, this weekend is the fifth major event in as many weekends. The opening of school—which alone nearly prostrates many institutions—was followed immediately by an international conference featuring the Dalai Lama of Tibet and participated in by over four thousand people.

Right after that were two parents' weekends. All of these people have done so superb a job that the Middlebury of the past, the present and the future is made proud by their work. Thank you, all of you.

What a privilege it is for both Joy and me to be part of your community. People from the community of the College and people from the community of Middlebury Town and the region have given us so warm and gracious a welcome that we began to feel at home almost as soon as we moved here. We have lived many places. In all those places, except for when we lived in our two native towns, Hong Kong and Kalamazoo, we arrived as complete strangers. Never have we two strangers been made to feel so much at home so quickly as we have in Middlebury.

Your welcome to us has been so warm that it would be boorish not to apologize at this time for a particularly barbaric defect of character. That is my lack of memory, especially when it comes to names. There is a linguistic term to describe this failing condition, the term "anomia." When I first came across the word "anomia" in teaching basic linguistics, the relief was instant and cathartic. I feel that I am a much better person now that I have a technical word with which to identify a plain lapse.

The title of these remarks is "Standing on the Shoulders of Giants," which is, as you know, from the famous statement attributed to Isaac Newton and others. The full statement is:

If we see a bit farther, it is because we are
standing on the shoulders of giants.

Middlebury College today is wonderfully prosperous, boasting a superb faculty, a campus whose beauty and physical state are a stunning example of what human beings really can do with dedication and extensive forethought, and whose programs and opportunities for young people are not bettered by any institution that I know of. Truly, there have been giants in this place. Two giants who have had special responsibility for the wonderful condition which the College now enjoys are President Jim Armstrong and President Olin Robison. That Middlebury College is nationally recognized as one of the nation's handful of best institutions is the result of thousands of people's labor, but the vision which aimed Middlebury towards that eminence is owed especially to Presidents Armstrong and Robison. Gentlemen, the school that you have bequeathed to those who follow you bears the happy marks of your caring intelligence and energy, and the shoes that you leave behind are so huge that I do not think of trying to fill them, but merely to swim around in them for the time that I am privileged to be here. Not expecting at all to see farther than these giants, but merely hoping to join the happy beneficiaries of their labors, I would change the famous statement to:

If we meet the challenges that the future has already shown us,
it will be because we stand on the shoulders of giants.

This nation has had a proud tradition of founding and nurturing colleges and universities. The partnership between this town and this College reflect nearly two centuries of the best of that tradition. Founded 190 years ago by the founders of the town itself, Middlebury College has

been continuously supported and nurtured and guided by the people of this place. That proud heritage was again formally marked at the beginning of today's festivities, which were launched by the chair of the town's selectmen, a symbolic act which testifies to the continuously magnificent mutual support which this College and this town give each other. I look forward to being very much a part of continuing this grand tradition.

In our nation as a whole, however, in the 1980's, concern for higher education degenerated in many quarters to name-calling and finger-pointing. Books with inflammatory titles such as *The Closing of the American Mind*, *Profscam*, and *Tenured Radicals* captured public attention. These books and others like them have portrayed American professors and American academic institutions as greedy, lazy, self-serving, and unconcerned about the youth of today. If one were to find their characterizations plausible, none of us in this profession could hold up our heads and we ourselves would call for the end of academia.

As angry as their authors apparently are, however, these books have by no means struck the worst blow that we have received. That blow came this past summer during the debate over whether George Steinbrenner of the New York Yankees should be allowed to continue in baseball. The columnist Mike Royko and the columnist George Will took different sides on this nationally critical issue. Royko settled that squabble with hurling at Will the worst insult he could muster. Royko referred to him as "Professor Will." Fellow scholars and teachers, we cannot sink any lower in the public estimation.

We do indeed have faults. In a few moments, I will mention a few issues in higher education which are of national concern and which require attention from the best schools such as Middlebury. By raising those issues, I am of course implying that we can do better. Nevertheless, I wish to state first on this day that I am proud to be a professor in America, that I am honored and privileged to be part of one of the nation's noblest and most serving professions. The overwhelming majority of colleagues that I have known at four American institutions and two Chinese ones have drawn their inspiration from enthusiasm and love for the continued and continuing renewal of the generation to come and from a passion for the subjects which they study. The overwhelming majority of colleagues that I have known has worked with a dedication which has asked so little, seldom calculating the hours put in on the job, though I personally think that most American academics average a sixty hour week and in term time very often exceed that by a good deal.

There are many challenges facing our colleges and universities in the decade that has just begun. I would like to discuss briefly with you a few of those challenges that I think will be of critical importance to us in the coming years.

The first of these issues is the need to be ever more explicit and definitive about what we can do and cannot do in higher education, and to be increasingly clear and comprehensive in our definition of our teaching role.

Our business is the education of post-adolescents. Our business as a residential college is comprehensive in that we offer ourselves and our facilities for the growth into full adulthood and development in most *normal* aspects of young people from the ages of about seventeen to about twenty-two.

Part of the unabashed pride that I expressed a moment ago in American higher education is based in my belief that, on the whole, we do a pretty good job at those tasks. (And from what I have been able to see in just a month and a half, Middlebury does a marvelous job at those tasks.)

As good a job as we do with most of our responsibilities, we in academia have been severely pressed over the past two or three decades by a society which has rapidly abandoned many of its social structures and much of its familial fabric. Educational institutions have been called upon to fill the gap that in previous generations was filled by churches, voluntary organizations, and indeed grandparents and parents. The worst burden, of course, falls upon the elementary and high schools, many of which have had to virtually abandon their proper vocation of teaching in order simply to cope with the problems of all society brought within their doors by children who have been spawned and then effectively abandoned. (Lest anyone think that I am referring here to any particular group, let me say that this pattern and the devastating problems that it causes for the whole of society are shared by groups in all social and economic classes and all ethnic groups.)

While the demands placed on colleges have not been as severe as on the schools, nevertheless, we have been expected to, and have attempted to, do more and different things than we are best at. In far too many cases, institutions of higher education have attempted to create on our campuses therapeutic societies which can respond to the increasing host of problems which are brought to us.

During the two decades or so that this change has been occurring, the graduate schools to whom we turn for new faculty have narrowed the scope of their responsibility and the responsibilities for which they train those who become new college teachers. The very extensive demands which good teaching makes beyond the research laboratory or library and beyond the lecture hall are too frequently absent from the graduate school and therefore never introduced to the new college teacher until he or she is actually responsible for undergraduate students.

The dumping of social and familial responsibilities on educational institutions (including the colleges) and the abandoning of much of their responsibilities by the graduate schools have together squeezed colleges and the undergraduate branches of universities into an uncomfortable and undesirable shape. In the coming decade, we must reaffirm our goals and purposes and reclaim our proper ground.

Undergraduate institutions are first of all academic institutions. Their principal task is teaching, and excellence in teaching is their minimal demand of their faculty. Because research and other forms of intellectual renewal are vital for the preservation and nurturing of the engaged mind,

research and equivalently intellectual renewal activities are encouraged as a necessary complement to excellent teaching. Residential colleges by their very nature accept responsibilities which extend beyond the academic and include nurturing maturity and growth in most other aspects of the lives of seventeen to twenty-two year olds.

Because we take on these other responsibilities, our roles as teachers do not end with the classroom, but include adult presence in other aspects of students' lives. That extended responsibility cannot be solely the task of a separate class of people hired in addition to the teaching faculty, but must to some degree include the academic professorate. For that to occur as a regular part of college life, colleges must be clear about the societies that they create within themselves and the expectations of normalcy that they will maintain for membership. Colleges cannot and should not try to sustain a bifurcated professional staff, some of whom are designated to respond to society's ills and some of whom are designated to conduct research and incidentally pass on the results of that research to students.

Colleges can and should sustain the most intellectually stimulating faculty who are continuously devoted to renewing themselves and their disciplines and who are engaged in appropriate ways with the lives of their students. That is the historical role of the American college. It is the task at which Middlebury College has established an admirable record. It is the task for which we as colleges must insist that the graduate schools train those seeking an academic career.

The heart of our enterprise is, of course, our teaching and *what we teach*. The American tradition is that the education that is offered to the most promising youngsters—those who actually are thought to have the potential to be the leaders of the next generation—is the curriculum of the liberal arts. The liberal arts aim to give the most promising young people a broad introduction to the best of humanity's discoveries and reflections as seen with a critical eye. The liberal arts aim not to train young people for any professions, but to develop their minds with a critical flexibility so that they can approach their professions wisely. The liberal arts in their full scope offer young people the fundamental tools with which uncertain futures can best be met.

Within the context of the liberal arts there are two academic areas that are virtually certain to be of special importance to the future of today's youth. They are science and foreign languages and international studies. Science is critically important right now because we face a critical shortage of scientists later in this decade and in the decade to come if we do not rapidly address our production of professional scientists. Science is critically important as well because that vast majority of today's students who will not become professional scientists will need to know a great deal more about scientific processes and claims and analyses than do the nonscientists of my generation just in order to be effective citizens in a democracy.

The study of the rest of the world and the languages that are spoken by most of its members is critical to us because our nation is now in all

respects a part of a much larger world than ourselves and a world which we have demonstrated repeatedly that we do not understand well. For today's college generation, knowledge of those parts of the world that are most foreign to us, including the Third World, will be of special importance. Even in my own brief adult life the regions of the world in which we have gotten into trouble have almost all been in areas of Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and Africa. The rate of world change and of our slipping unexpectedly into conflicts or potential conflicts has increased, as our current predicament in the Middle East shows. It is most probable that this rate of change will increase during the adulthood of today's college students. They must not perpetuate the massive ignorance of cultures and languages which has characterized all American generations before them.

Through the extraordinary foresight of our predecessors, Middlebury College is prepared in ways that only one or two other schools can claim to provide the education for the future that today's college-aged youth will need and to do so within the overall context of a rigorous liberal arts curriculum.

Middlebury is one of the nation's major science colleges as measured by its share in the production of a disproportionate number of future scientists. The College's commitment to science dates from its founding. In the College's initial decade, the first professor of what was then called natural philosophy, Frederick Hall, was given a two-year leave to study, collect specimens and books and to meet the great savants of his day in Europe before he was required to come to Middlebury to begin work. That alone would make him the envy of today's science professors, but to top it off, when he did get here, his public lectures were so popular that the College was able to charge for attendance. Fearful that they might lose so valuable an asset, the Trustees soon doubled his salary. In so doing, they paid him more highly than they did the founding president, Jeremiah Atwater, causing Atwater thereupon to resign. It would be difficult to demonstrate a stronger commitment to science than that. And that commitment has continued at Middlebury right through to today.

Middlebury's devotion to the study of other lands and their languages is most widely known through the famous Language Schools. Simply put, the Middlebury Language Schools offer the best intensive language instruction in the nation. It is a remarkable testimony to the foresight of our predecessors that they were founded a full seventy-five years ago. Less popularly known, the undergraduate curriculum of the regular academic year has also become a locus of sterling language instruction and, as well, cultural studies of various areas of the world.

In its long-standing support of excellence in science and excellence in foreign languages and international studies, Middlebury is academically the college of the future. Undoubtedly, the specific needs of students in the years to come in science and international studies will require adjustment even by Middlebury. For example, it is most likely that our curricular attention to the Third World will need enhancement in order to prepare today's students for their future more appropriately than my

generation was prepared. Middlebury's mature strength and unparalleled experience in teaching languages and area studies gives this College the basis upon which to build studies of the Third World that have the depth and rigor equivalent to anything on this wonderful campus. Truly this is the college of the future.

Among the most talked of issues in higher education today is ethics. Before I briefly talk about that matter, I think it is best for you to begin with pronouncing Middlebury's official name in Chinese—which is itself a major ethical statement.

明德大學

MINGDE DAXUE

Middlebury's Chinese name is taken from the passage which you heard earlier today.* That same passage is displayed here on the platform in the calligraphy of Professor Ta-tuan Chen, the eminent teacher and scholar who is responsible for leading Middlebury's Chinese School into its place of unequalled excellence. The passage is taken from the classic *The Great Learning*. Our name in Chinese means "magnifying virtue" or "illustrating virtue" or "manifesting clear character."

What is meant by that term and the thrust of *The Great Learning* is not some private righteousness or adherence to a list of *don'ts*. What is envisioned in the ethic of the tradition of Confucius is a public morality of responsibility to others. Confucius and his followers understood virtue very much to include the greater responsibilities that are incurred by people with greater privileges. Confucius saw the role of leadership to be entirely a role of service.

I believe that the notion of virtue that is expressed in the Chinese "DE" is not entirely distant from the meaning of the Latin word *virtus*, which forms part of Middlebury's motto, *scientia et virtus*.

[President Armstrong, a classicist, will no doubt sympathize when I say that I was enormously relieved to discover that the noun *lux* was not incorporated into our motto. I was nurtured by a school whose motto was *lux et veritas*, and most recently have worked for one which uses *lux esto*. When you have a name that sounds like Dim Light, you tend to notice such things.]

Colleges are under increasingly loud pressure from many quarters to teach ethics. Whatever the specific motivation, some of the calls for more

*Chapter 1, *The Great Learning* (A Confucian Classic)

The way of learning to be great consists in manifesting the clear character, loving the people, and abiding in the highest good.

Only after knowing what to abide in can one be calm. Only after having been calm can one be tranquil. Only after having achieved tranquility can one have peaceful repose. Only after deliberation can the end be attained. Things have their roots and branches. Affairs have their beginnings and their ends. To know what is first and what is last will lead one near the Way.

effort on the "ethics thing" come perilously close to one generation bashing another. Some calls for increased moral instruction also amount to a given group demanding central attention for itself at the expense of others.

I have drawn attention to the public and communal heart of the Chinese and Latin ethical norms because they are rather similar to the convictions held by the leaders of our own society when Middlebury was founded, and they speak very much to us today. If we are to have an ethic in the coming decades, if as institutions we do indeed put more emphasis on moral instruction, the ethic that we teach will have to be *intergenerational* and *commonly* defined. It will have to be an ethic that will begin with the responsibilities we owe to our successors. That is something that the current college generation has been much more attuned to than my own has. Their greater sophistication and sensitivity to long-term responsibility in the management of wealth and resources was demonstrated by Middlebury students at the recent Spirit and Nature conference in ways that made us all immensely proud.

The ethic of the future will also have to begin with an understanding of the responsibilities that we owe to each other here and now along with the importance of social roles and their obligations; the understanding of social structure is the minimal stability necessary for any morality to be realized. That is something that is often grasped better by age than by youth. Age also understands better the need for patience, long-term optimism, tolerance, and the fundamental humor of life. The ethic of the coming decade will need to be an ethic which centers and draws us together around commonly understood notions of justice rather than providing us reasons for divisiveness. It will need to be an ethic which celebrates the extraordinary diversity of humanity and that yet reaffirms the common thirst for principles that can be accepted as universal. It most especially will need to be an ethic which sees our human diversity as a part of the center which draws us together and that therefore eschews and denounces the use of constituency politics as a substitute for a true morality which can inspire our lives.

Indeed, we do need to teach ethics to the young and, indeed, the coming decade should see us as institutions adding to our eagerness to do that. In doing so, all of us will find that we are stretching our minds and our hearts to arrive at and accept governing principles that are of universal value rather than of value principally to us and the groups with which we identify ourselves.

The last of the issues that I wish to raise with you is the most easily stated one, but may be the most difficult to accomplish. It is the need for the leading colleges to come much closer than we have done to approximate in our populations the makeup of the American population as a whole. There are many reasons for needing to do this. I will mention only one. Before the first third of the next century is passed, there will be no ethnic majority in America's early elementary schools. About fifteen years later, there will be no ethnic majority in our colleges. Right now, there is underway a precipitous decline in the number of high school

graduates in the eastern, northern, and central parts of our country. That decline is particularly acute among white groups. When the numbers of high school graduates level off and begin to climb again, the majority of the restored growth will occur among groups now considered minorities, particularly Black and Hispanic. Given that set of facts, if the best colleges are to remain premier institutions, and if they are to continue to draw to themselves the best students—those who are potentially leaders—then they will need to attract and keep an ethnic representation that is not too distant from that obtaining in the country as a whole. We will need to do that for the simple reason that that is the way which Mother Nature distributes native talent, and if we want our fair share of that best talent, a commensurate proportion will be found among the groups currently underrepresented in our best schools.

In order to achieve this goal, the premier colleges will need to become places where members of minority groups can be comfortably productive. Saying that absolutely does not imply adding to the divisiveness and governance by constituency politics to which I objected a moment ago. Saying that we need to work to become a place where members of today's minorities can be comfortably productive definitely *does* imply adding their historical and contemporary experience to the stock of experience which we share in our common ethos. Both curricularly and extra-curricularly, and in ways that are appropriate, and with the same rigor with which we pursue all other subjects, we must include the historical and current participation of today's minorities in the story of our people and how we study and understand it.

Further, in order to attain the goal of a representatively diverse student body, colleges will need to become similarly representative in their professional staffs and faculties. Without such representativeness among the role models of the institution, commitments to diversity would hardly be whole, and students—especially members of the current white majority—would be deprived of an opportunity to experience what a harmonious multiethnic society might really be like.

The challenges which I have summarized as facing higher education will require from us considerable imagination and devotion and commitment if we hope to meet them successfully. In the decade that has just begun, it is clear that we will need to meet all challenges with new constraints governing our material resources. The 1990's will be a time when we will be continually called upon to do more with less.

Middlebury College is remarkably suited to leading the way in meeting these challenges. The very founding of a college in this place in 1800 was an act of tremendous commitment to the future by a group of people who could have been thought by outsiders to have little ground for optimism besides their own determination. Much of the College's first century was devoted to the struggle for survival. Never in that period did the College abandon or alter its principal mission or deviate from its high standards. In the 1880's, a time when Middlebury almost disappeared, the College not only prevailed over adverse events, but set the stage for becoming the superb modern college that it has become in this century.

The future has been the continuous watchword of this College. In its curriculum, in its planning, and in the steadfast courage with which it has constantly reaffirmed its commitment to the future while remaining always the most rigorous of liberal arts colleges, Middlebury has set a pace that few institutions, no matter how prestigious for their time, have been able to keep. It is through that foresightedness that Middlebury became the remarkable institution that it is today. It is through its past being that of the college of the future that Middlebury has refined and reaffirmed its classical liberal arts education while simultaneously developing unparalleled strengths in the very subjects needed for the future of today's and tomorrow's students.

Commentators tell us that the prospect of material restraining is making us an inordinately anxious people. Our youth, we are told, are haunted by the fear that their standard of living may not equal that which they have enjoyed as children in their parents' homes. Those who stress too much our material dependence forget our history and belittle us as a people. Throughout most of our past, whatever wealth we have achieved has been based on hard work, and our favored legends of ourselves even in these days of modern comfort remain those of our ancestors who struggled to open land and plant the towns and cities which we now enjoy. Those leaders whom we remember with awe and cite as models for ourselves and our children are seldom from our gilded ages, but instead are those represented by a rustic frontier lawyer who led us through a civil war, a cripple who took us through a depression and a world war, and a man, who, though he had himself grown up in wealth, is remembered most for telling us not to ask what our country can do for us, but what we can do for our country.

It is that which has been the spirit of Middlebury. Far from being daunting or forboding, the challenges of the coming years recall Middlebury's past at its best. The need to face the coming years with ever more modest demands and ever more generous concern, to develop a society that is governed by common moral bonds, to celebrate our human variety, and to take as our sacred responsibility the direct and engaged education of the best of our young people in what they will need for their futures grounded in the best from our past—those things have been at the heart of the history of this College.

It is that history which has made Middlebury the College of the future in a way that few other schools have become. It is that history and how it is manifested in today's Middlebury that makes it so inestimable a privilege to be a part of this magnificent school.

Thank you.